

Ecumenism, and should *you* be Catholic?

By Graham Osborne

Carrying on from our last article that detailed the New Testament blueprint for the hierarchical Church Jesus founded, here is a straightforward question to every Christian in the world. If Jesus, the “wise builder”, founded a Church on rock, promised the gates of hell would never prevail against (i.e. it would never fall or apostacize), gave it his authority (the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, with the power to bind and loose on earth what is bound/loosed in heaven), appointed a leader, Peter, in a perpetual office, and then made provisions for both the appointing of successors to the Apostles (the office of Bishop), as well as the handing on of the authority he left it – shouldn’t you be a part of this Church?

One of my favorite early Church quotes comes from St. Irenaeus (AD 190), a disciple of St Polycarp, who was taught by St John the Apostle. He sums things up well for us, writing: “we shall confound all those... by pointing out here the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient Church known to all, founded and organized at Rome ... that Church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the Apostles. For with this Church, because of its superior origin, *all the Churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world*; and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the Apostolic tradition.”

St Clement, ordained to the Priesthood by St Peter and the fourth Pope, gives us one of the earliest and best examples of papal succession and authority in his forceful letter to the Church in Corinth, written in A.D. 80: “*You, therefore, who laid the foundation of the rebellion, submit to the presbyters [priests] and be chastened to repentance, bending your knees in a spirit of humility*”, and, “*If anyone disobey the things which have been said by Him through us, let them know that they will involve themselves in transgressions and in no small danger... being obedient to the things we have written through the Holy Spirit*”.

Why did the Church at Corinth write to Clement to decide their problem for them, when St. John, an Apostle, was still alive – and living just down the road in Ephesus! And what business would the Bishop of Rome have in telling the Bishop of Corinth what to do, and in such strong terms?! Because Clement was the Pope!

If your Church can’t trace its leader directly back to the Apostles, and specifically back to the Apostle, Peter, you have to ask: why not? This was the blueprint Jesus left us for His Church in the New Testament, and it is unquestionably continued in the very first centuries of Christianity.

And if your church has split off at some point from this historical Church Jesus built, why has it done this? Because of a King desiring a divorce? Because of a disgruntled monk who disagreed with, and then rejected, the authority of Jesus’ Church and replaced it with the authority of the Bible Alone – an unscriptural doctrine of his own making, and *unheard of in the previous fifteen hundred years of Christianity*?

Protestantism is rapidly disintegrating into tens of thousands of conflicted and contradictory denominations. And all of these denominations substantially disagree with several doctrinal teachings of the Catholic Church as well. And these conflicts are not over minor matters. For example: what about the Eucharist? Jesus says, “he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (John 6:54). Is salvation by faith alone or grace alone? Can you lose that salvation? Does it matter whether you’ve been baptized? How about infant baptism? What about abortion, divorce and remarriage, contraception or the “rapture”? What about the Pope, the Blessed Mother, confession or purgatory? Is Genesis literal, or is evolution the answer? And dozens of other important disputed issues?

Gone is the Christian unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17:22-23: “that they may be one, as we are one ... that they may be brought to perfection as one.” And with it has also gone the heart of evangelization. People were to come to know that God loved them and sent his only Son to save them largely by the *perfect* unity they were supposed to see in Jesus’ followers: “that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:23).

St Paul taught that, “There is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one Baptism” (Ephesians 4:4-5). How do we restore this fractured Christianity? How can all these contrary groups ever know with certainty the unifying, doctrinal truths Jesus and the Apostles left us?

This is where ecumenism comes in: respectful discussions and activities undertaken to promote Christian unity. And ecumenism is *always* based on truth, which often involves an acknowledgement of differences.

It is critical to understand that true ecumenism does not lie in agreeing to disagree, or in compromising on truths or disputed doctrines. Again, it resides in absolute truth, coupled with a genuine attempt to accurately understand the other side’s position, while charitably presenting yours. The Catholic Church’s Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR) confirms this: “It is ... essential that ... doctrine should be clearly presented in its entirety. Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism” than a process “in which the purity of Catholic doctrine suffers loss and its genuine and certain meaning is clouded.

And while much progress has been made in ecumenism, for example the recent Lutheran Accord, there are still many very serious areas of separation and disagreement. We must honestly acknowledge this.

And it is here that the Church has the very difficult job of proclaiming a truth that many will not want to hear. A truth that could easily be taken for arrogance, and that could easily offend our “separated brethren.” But it is the only truth that can mend the shattered frame of Christianity: Jesus left us one set of truths and left those truths to one Church, founded on rock: unarguably, historically, the Catholic Church.

The very first paragraph of the Decree on Ecumenism elaborates: “The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ Himself were divided. Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.”

Carrying on, the Decree on Ecumenism proclaims: “We believe that Our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, in order to establish the one Body of Christ on earth to which all should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God (UR 3).”

I write this not to stir up trouble. I write it because it is true. The Catholic Church is unarguably the Church Jesus founded. This is not arrogance, but simple, historical truth. Jesus laid the foundation for true Christian unity in the Church he founded. Despite the sinfulness and fallenness of its leaders and members at times [recall Jesus picked 12 and one of them was Judas], the Catholic Church still remains, “the pillar and foundation of the truth” [1 Timothy 3:15]. And the “wisdom of God” will still “be made known through the Church” (Ephesians 3:9-10), with Jesus sending the Holy Spirit to protect it from all doctrinal error: “the Holy Spirit ... will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all

that I have said ... the Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all the truth... and ... declare to you the things that are to come” (John 14:26, 16:23).

But the Decree on Ecumenism continues on a very hopeful note: “men who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect.” This is good news! And it is our call as Catholics to love Jesus and learn our faith, and then always be prepared to share it with anyone who asks, but to do this with “gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15) – to reach out to our “separated brethren” (UR 22) with great charity and bring them into full unity with the Body of Christ. This is how Christian unity will be restored – the only way.

What Church in the world still upholds all the first Christian moral teachings: defends against abortion, still insists that, “male and female he created them”, and that true marriage can only be between a man and a woman, that divorce and remarriage is black and white wrong, that artificial contraception is a grave evil, that living together, pornography, masturbation are all grave moral evils, that an active homosexual lifestyle is wrong, that euthanasia is absolutely contrary to God’s law. Don’t we all long to belong to the one Church that still upholds all these Christian morals that Jesus left to *His* Church?

In a time when the powers of hell gather against the Christian Church worldwide, it has never been more important that Christians are united in the faith that was “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). There has been a recent flood of Protestant pastors into the Catholic Church like we have never seen before. Godly men and women, Bible scholars – Christians who love God with their whole hearts. But virtually every one of them never dreamed they would someday be Catholic. For most, it was the furthest thing from their mind. But what they thought the Catholic Church taught and believed turned out to be radically mistaken!

If you are a Catholic, or a separated brother or sister in Christ, and have never read a comprehensive book defending the Catholic Church from the various criticisms many level at it – one that was actually written by a knowledgeable, faithful Catholic – I challenge you to do it. Read Scott Hahn’s *Rome Sweet Home*, or Pat Madrid’s *Surprised by Truth*, or if you’re more theologically inclined, perhaps Karl Keating’s *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*. Or maybe *Catholic Answers’ Essential Catholic Survival Guide*. If you are a brave evangelical who knows his stuff, and you’re certain the Catholic Church is wrong, then read *Evangelical Exodus* and prepare to be stunned. But whatever you do, don’t neglect the Church Jesus founded. It is a stumbling block to many, but the pearl of great price for certain...